Fabbrica della Conoscenza

Carmine Gambardella

XI Forum Internazionale di Studi



Fabbrica della Conoscenza numero 39
Collana fondata e diretta da Carmine Gambardella

Fabbrica della Conoscenza
Collana fondata e diretta da **Carmine Gambardella**

HERITAGE ARCHITECTURE LANDESIGN

focus on **CONSERVATION REGENERATION INNOVATION**

Le vie dei Mercanti _ XI Forum Internazionale di Studi

Carmine GAMBARDELLA



La scuola di Pitagora editrice

Carmine **G**ambardella (a cura di)
HERITAGE ARCHITECTURE LANDESIGN
focus on CONSERVATION REGENERATION INNOVATION
Le vie dei Mercanti
XI Forum Internazionale di Studi

editing:
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80132 Napoli
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www.scuoladipitagora.it
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ISBN 978-88-6542-290-8

Finito di stampare nel mese di maggio 2013

Heritage Architecture Landesign
focus on Conservation Regeneration Innovation
Le vie dei Mercanti
XI Forum Internazionale di Studi

Aversa | Capri
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Peer review

Scholars has been invited to submit researches on theoretical and methodological aspects related to Heritage, Architecture and LanDesign, and show real applications and experiences carried out on this themes.
Based on blind peer review, abstracts has been accepted, conditionally accepted, or rejected.
Authors of accepted and conditionally accepted papers has been invited to submit full papers.
These has been again peer-reviewed and selected for the oral session and publication, or only for the publication in the conference proceedings.

Conference report

200 abstracts received from:

Australia, Austria,
Brazil,
Canada, Chile, China, Cyprus,
Denmark,
France,
Germany, Greece,
India, Israel, Italy,
Jamaica, Jordan,
Kingdom of Bahrain, Kosovo,
Lebanon,
Malaysia, Malta, Morocco, Mexico,
New Zealand,
Poland, Portugal,
Russia,
Serbia, Slovak Republic, Spain,
Tunisia, Turkey,
Ukraine, United Kingdom, U.S.A.

About 300 authors involved.

157 papers published.

Preface

The XI edition of the International Forum Le Vie dei Mercanti entitled Heritage, Architecture, LanDesign aims to promote an international debate on local experiences relating to the issues of conservation, regeneration and innovation in heritage, architecture, landscape and design.

In recent years, technological developments have revolutionized not only the forms that surround us but also our daily routines. However, this new global language often does not take into consideration the identity and vocation of the area, which require appropriate courses of action in relation to both the individual context and local traditions.

The historical memory of the characteristics of the identity, local materials, building traditions as well as the tangible and intangible cultural heritage is a repertoire of signs to draw from in order to operate within each historical context and consequently enhance its uniqueness.
The recovery of the authentic vocations of a place does not mean inaction, but rather regeneration through measures to enhance an area by increasing its natural strengths, transforming the weaknesses into opportunities for future development based on innovation.
The international comparison can be an opportunity to share good examples of conservation, regeneration and innovation related to the tangible and intangible heritage in its broadest sense; architecture intended as the identity of the places that shapes the landscape, from traditional to global forms; design at all scales, from the object to the territory, in a sustainable way to start a process of regeneration through a new relationship between man and the environment.
The conference is open to multidisciplinary experiences of one or more of the proposed themes. Scholars are invited to submit research on theoretical and methodological aspects as well as present experiences and practical applications carried out on these issues.

Carmine Gambardella

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Aversa | Capri
13-14-15 June, 2013
Le Vie dei Mercanti XI Forum Internazionale di Studi

The Ablution Room of the Hafsid dynasty in Tunis: architectural and artistic aspects

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Abstract

Starting Ottoman era to the present day, the Hafsid monuments of the Medina of Tunis have undergone major transformations both from a structural and from stylistic-formal point of view. In many cases, the refurbishing have completely deleted the elevation of the original buildings, leaving only the fundamental trace of typological system. In other rare cases, however, it has preserved the original architectural structure, as the case of ablution room *Mid'at es-Soltāne*, built between 1448 and 1450.
The monument is located in the heart of the old town, down the road that leads to the *sūq al-‘Attarin* (market Perfumers). This is an area adjacent to the mosque *al-Zaytūna* for the faithful who use the site for the ritual washing of the Muslim prayer. The room has a unique architectural style that draws much from the artistic traditions of Eastern from Syria and Egypt in particular.
The research is based on the study of the surviving parts of the planimetric and formal components by means of a systematic reading of the architecture of the second half of the fifteenth century in Tunisia and the Near East.

Keywords: Ablution Room, Hafsid architecture, *Mid'at es-Soltāne*, Medina of Tunis.

At the end of the Almohad dynasty (1147-1269), North Africa was ruled by three dynasties that were in constant conflict: the Marinid dynasty (1196-1465), that lived in Morocco; the western part of Algeria was under the control of the *Abd al*-Wadids (1235-1500); while the Hafsids (1235-1575) governed the eastern part of Algeria, modern day Tunisia and the west of Lybia. Under the constant threat of incursions by the surrounding Berbers, these dynasties fought for the hegemony of North Africa [1].
The founder of the Hafsid dynasty was Abū Zakariyā Yahya ibn Abī Hafs, known as Abū Zakariyā I (1228-1249). Whilst in Marrakesh, the capital of the Almohad kingdom, he declared his autonomy over the Ifriqiya territory. The hafsid princes governed Tunisia for almost three hundred years with its capital based in Tunis [2].
It was only towards the middle of the 14th century that the Hafsids were threatened from the west by the Marinids from Morocco, occupying the capital twice in 1349 and 1356. After the fall of Granada (1492), the Spanish – using naval power - threatened the coast of Maghreb up to Tunis. In the same period, the Barbary pirates, led by Redbeard, who had already occupied Algiers (1516), conquered Tunis in 1534, thus ending the reign of the Hafsid sultan Muhammad ibn al-Hasan (1573-1574). The rising power of the Spanish and the consequent fear of the Barbary pirates, led to the invitation for Turkish intervention which brought about the Ottoman conquest of Tunis under Sinan Pasha in 1574 [3]. From that time to the present period, the Hafsid monuments of the city have undergone significant transformations both from a structural and a formal-stylistic viewpoint. In many cases the change has completely modified the original buildings leaving only traces of the original foundations. Instead, in rare cases, the architectural structure has remained intact.

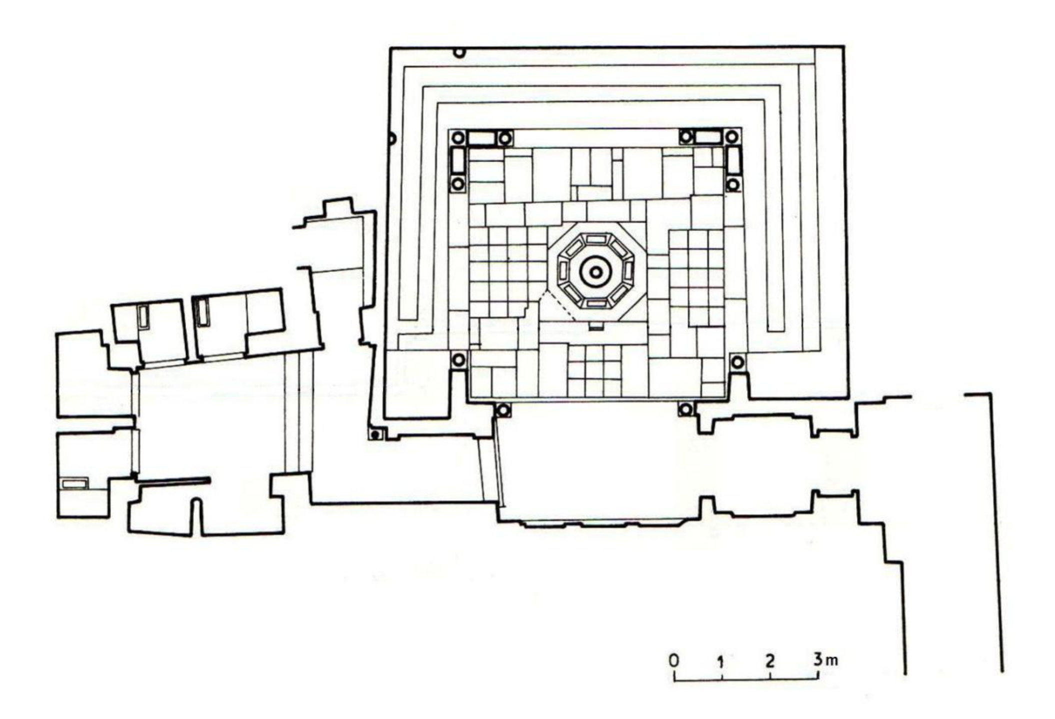
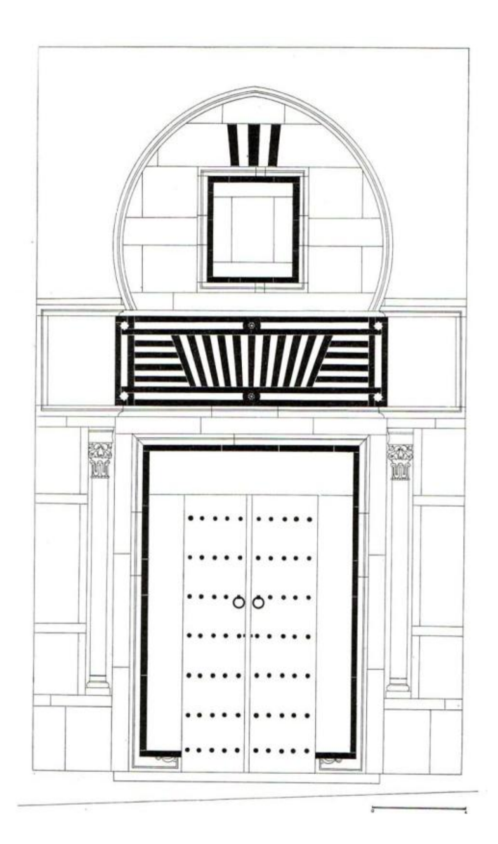


Fig. 1: Tunis, ablution room, floor plan.

In effect, Hafsid Tunisia went through a period of great economic and cultural prosperity under princes Abū Fāris 'Abd al-'Aziz (1394-1434) and Abū 'Amr 'Uthmān (1436-1488); many monuments were, in fact, built during this period. Among the most famous are: the Al Qasba with its mosque, the restoration of the *al-Zaytūna* mosque, with the annexion of the library, and the building of a prestigious ablution area called *Mid'at es-Soltāne* between 1448 and 1450 [4].
This monument is found in the heart of the historical centre, at the end of the road which leads to *sūq al-'Attarin* (market of the perfume makers). It is an area annexed to the great *al-Zaytūna* mosque, used by worshipers to wash according to the traditional rituals of the Muslim faith.
Written sources say that the monument was commissioned by the Hafsid sultan Abū 'Amr 'Uthmān (1436-1488). The building of the monument was presided over by the architect Ahmad al-Qusantini with work starting in 1448 and ending two years later [5]. The building has undergone some reconstruction especially of the wooden covering as can be seen from an inscription on a beam which dates back to the 18th century [6]. The rest of the building is in pure Hafsid style: the portal, the arches, the capitals, and the fountain.
The entrance still preserves an elegantly decorated portal in two-tone marble with columns adorned with Hispano-Moorish capitals. The architrave is enhanced by a large slab made of ashlar blocks of black and white marble arranged with horizontal courses at the sides and radiating from the centre. Towards the middle of the 13th century the French architect Villard de Honnecourt paid particular attention to this technical process for stone. In his notes, kept in the National Library in Paris (Ms. fr. 19093, tav. XL, fol. 20), the famous architect describes the technique used to cut blocks for an arch in such a way as to obtain blocks which are suitable to be placed radially [7].
The entrance door leads to two halls, separated by horseshoe shaped arches with two-tone ashlar blocks and surmounted by a rectangular panel decorated with strips of black marble which form three quadrants of black and white marble with a star enclosed in a square in the middle.
The inlaid panels used to decorate the walls are representative of two-tone geometrical decorations. They can be summarized according to various fundamental geometrical shapes: flat arches or medallions composed of thin strips with ashlar blocks in different shapes; stars, intertwined, cylindrical, polygonal. They have all been created through the use of inlaid black marble strips on white marble.
The ornate with stellar motifs uses the basic principles of geometry, repetition, subdivision and multiplication to create a multitude of designs. The source of inspiration is the polygonal composition which normally originates from a central circle divided by polygons from which the various polygonal weaves (called stellar) develop. They are formed by surfaces of perfect proportions. The star forms part of the originating motifs of the geometric decoration to such an extent as to be counted as the most symbolic of Islamic art [8].
This type of inlaid decoration is found in Hafsid architecture on both walls and floors as we can see, for example, in the internal courtyard of the mausoleum of Sidi Qāsim al-Zalījī (second half of the 15th century) [9].



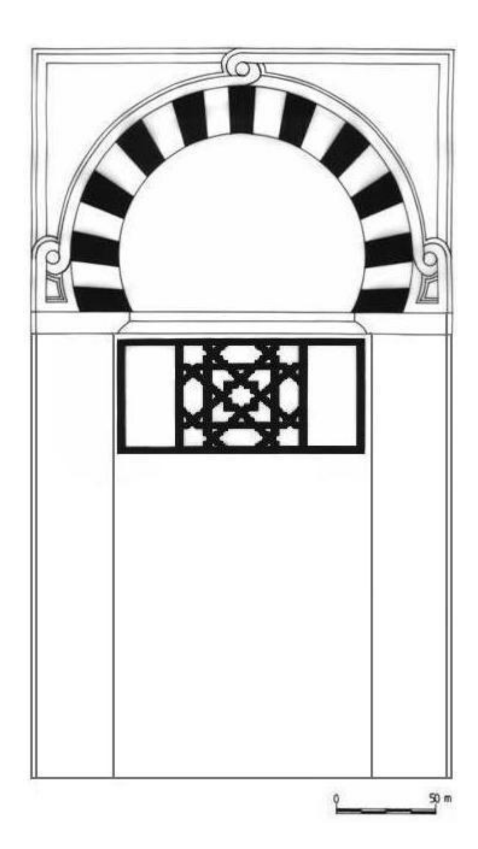


Fig. 2: Tunis, ablution room, frontal view of the entrance.

Fig. 3: Tunis, ablution room, main hall, frontal view of a blind niche.

The fulcrum of *Mid'at es-Soltāne* is composed of a peristyle square room surrounded by four large horseshoe shaped arches with two-tone ashlar blocks which lie on Hispano-Moorish capitals. The arched lintels of the arches are covered with slabs of black and white marble and are decorated with geometrical motifs. In the middle of the room there is an octagonal fountain, whose facades have panels of marble that are almost a metre high and which are decorated with imaginative geometrical motifs.

At the base of the piers, on both sides, a snake like decoration carved in relief can be seen. It is often presented in the shape of one or two spirals whose surface is covered with scales and is very similar to the palmettes on the Hispano-Moorish capitals in Tunis of the same period. This motif is also present in other monuments of the Hafsid era: on the piers of the doors of the mausoleums of Sidi Ben Arus, Sidi al-Kala'i and Sidi Qāsim al-Zalījī and on the door of the library of Abū 'Amr 'Uthmān in the *al-Zaytūna mosque* in Tunis [10]. Therefore, it can be said that the snakelike ornamental motif subsequently developed, elaborately, and is used extensively in Ottoman buildings and religious monuments [11].

The beauty, and the particular style, of the room drew the attention of many scholars of the time. Among these the famous poem by ad-Damāmini can be recalled. It defined *mid'at* as a beautiful building built in a perfect architectural style which is so elegant and finely executed to the point that it can be considered a model in its genre [12]. The shapes, and the architectural and decorative techniques used in the Ablution room recall the Ayyubid and Mameluke buildings in Syria and Egypt built in the 14th and 15th centuries, where similar motifs are found in black and white inlaid marble which were used to exhault the chromatic elements inside the monuments [13]. Among the most famous examples in Cairo are the masonry face of the funeral hall of Madrasah of Barkuk (14th century) and of the Ahmed al-Bardini mosque (15th century), the floor of the funeral mosque of the sultan *al-Malik* al-Ashraf Barsabay (1421-1438) and of the *Maqsura* of the Abū Bekr Mazal mosque (15th century) [14].

It is worth noting that these decorative motifs were probably brought to Tunisia through Egypt in the 15th century. This technique was widely used in the monuments during the following centuries, such as the *zāwiya* of Sidi Qāsim al-Zalījī (end of the 15th century), and even more so in the Ottoman era in the Medina of Tunis. Among the numerous examples of this last period, Dar Abū Zayane (15th – 16th century), The Palace of Dey 'Othman (16th-17th century), the Mausoleums of Sidi Yusef and Hammuda Pasha (17th century), *Dar* al-Mrabet (17th century) and *Dar* al-Bey (18th century) [15], should be mentioned.

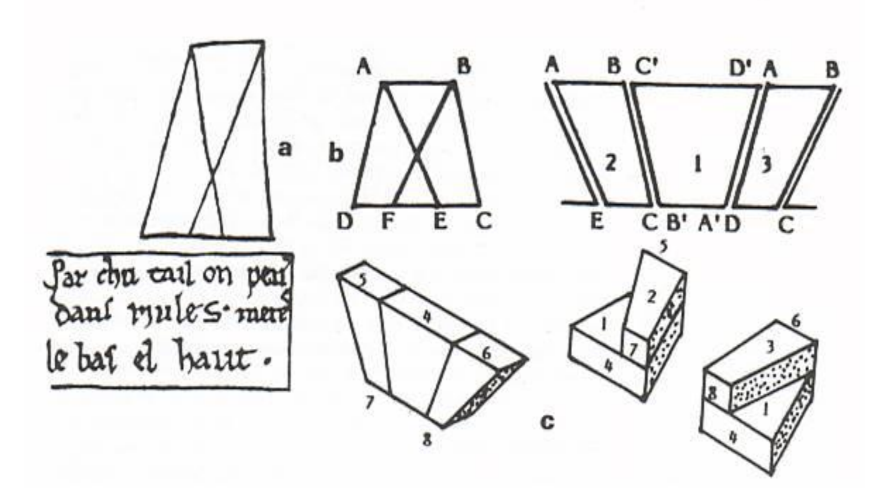


Fig. 4: The working phases of the radial segments according to the architect Villard de Honnecourt.



Fig. 5: Tunis, ablution room, facade of the south side of the peristyle.

It is worth reiterating the Andalusian influence. This influence took root in *Ifriqiya* during the first influx of emigrants who took refuge in Ifriqiya starting from the 8th century. This is also confirmed by the famous historian of that time, Ibn Khaldūn: “The arts develop admirably albeit with less momentum than in Spain. In addition, the influence of Egypt is particularly fruitful. The two countries are not distant and Tunisian travellers visit Egypt every year. Sometimes they live there for some period of time making artistic objects and sharing technical knowledge. For this reason Tunis has become as educated as Cairo, and Spain itself, thanks to the Andalusian refugees of the 7th and 8th centuries [16].” Moreover, the good relations between the Hasid sultans and the Mamluk rulers of Egypt contributed to the spreading of this artistic style during the 15th century. All of this was possible thanks to the continuous exchange of artisans between the two countries as can be seen from inscriptions written, by Egyptian craftsmen, during particular public works [17].

In conclusion, it can be stated that the Hafsid era was characterised by a simple but highly creative architectural output thanks to which diverse Mediterranean decorative features were brought together. On the one hand, the Hafsid repertoire remained linked to the artistic and architectural elements which developed in *Ifriqiya* such as the ancient Punic, Roman and Byzantine ones as well as the Islamic Aghlabid, Fatimid and Zirid ones; on the other hand, it was influenced by diverse trends coming from Andalusia, Morocco and even Mamluk Egypt.



Fig. 6: Tunis, ablution room, main hall, inlaid panel.

Fig. 7: Tunis, ablution room, medallion on the arched lintels of the peristyle.

Fig. 8: Tunis, ablution room, snake design carved on the upright arch of the peristyle.

Fig. 9: Tunis, ablution room, Hispano-Moorish capitals.

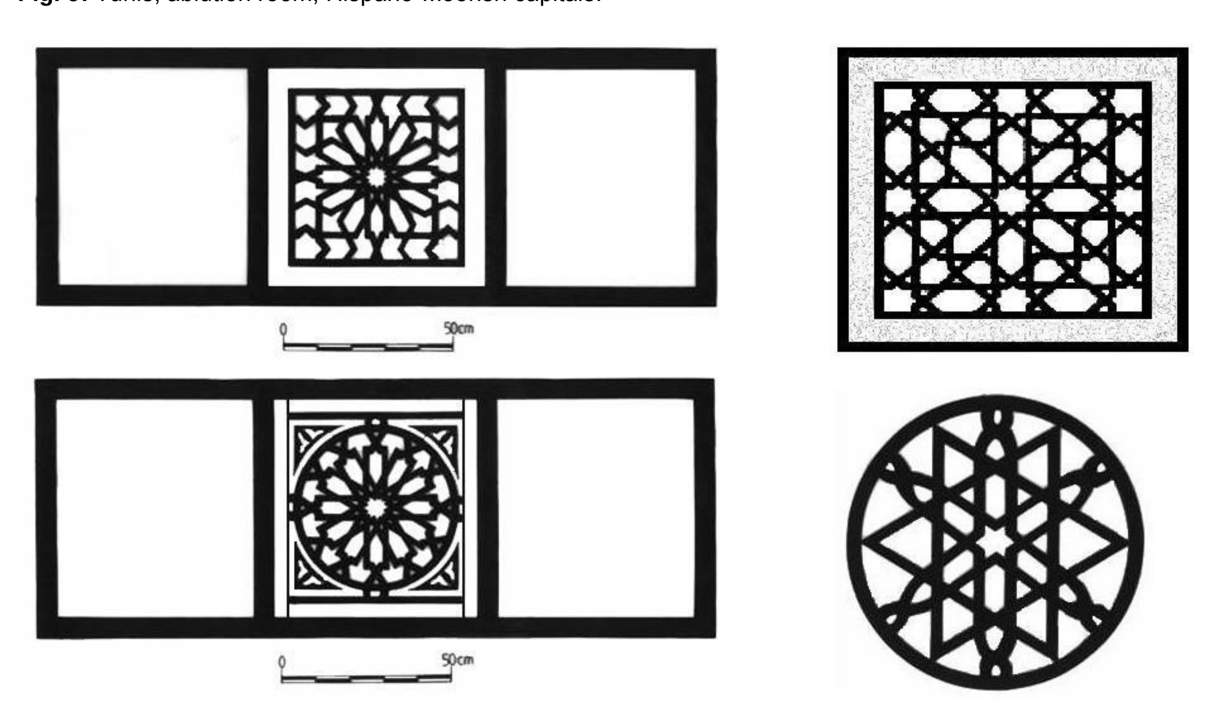


Fig. 10: Tunis, ablution room, main hall, two-tone panels inlaid with stellar motifs.

Fig. 11: Tunis, ablution room, facade of the principle corridor, marble panel with a geometric pattern.

Fig. 12: Tunis, ablution room, drawing of a medallion.

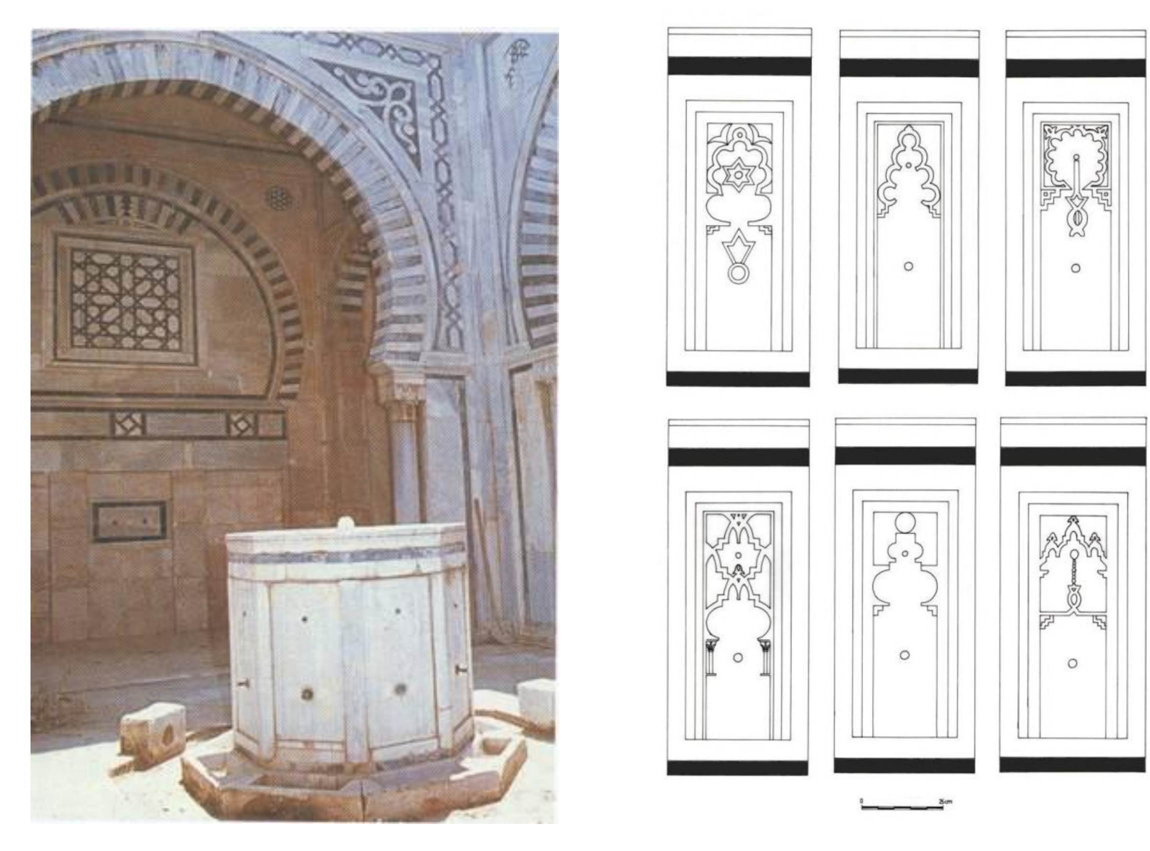


Fig. 13: Tunis, ablution room, octagonal fountain.

Fig. 14: Tunis, ablution room, white marble panel facade of the fountain.

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